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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000723

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NONDENOMINATIONAL PROTESTANT GROUP  
GROWS DESPITE OBSTACLES

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. According to Pastor Vladimir Tolmachev, his registered Greater Grace Church encounters numerous government hindrances, despite its legal status. Religious literature, youth camps, property ownership, registration of branches, and invitations for foreign visitors all need government approval, which is seldom granted. Still, the pastor reported that the church is growing, both in Ashgabat and in Mary, and conducts a robust schedule of bible courses outside of its regular weekly worship service. Since 1995, church members have proselytized in public on a regular basis without interference by the police. The pastor stressed the need for meaningful dialogue between representatives of religious groups and government officials in order to resolve outstanding issues and allow churches to enjoy equal rights under the law. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On June 4, Political Officer met with Vladimir Tolmachev, the pastor of the Greater Grace Church in Ashgabat. The church is a nondenominational Protestant group affiliated with the Baltimore-based Greater Grace World Outreach. It was founded in 1995 by ethnic Russian missionaries from Baku, who remained until 1999 when all missionaries were required to leave Turkmenistan. The group has been registered since 2004. The meeting with Political Officer took place in the church's recently-rented office and multi-purpose space located in the basement of a privately-owned commercial building. In addition to the office space, the church rents the Kosmos movie theater on Sunday mornings for a ten o'clock worship service. Typical attendance at the Sunday service is 75-80 people, although attendance can reach 250 on holidays. The Ashgabat congregation is multi-ethnic and Russian-speaking, with a small percentage of ethnic Turkmen. The office space is used for daily activities such as bible studies and video courses from the international church's centers in Baltimore, Budapest and Moscow. The video courses are preliminary bible school courses, which can be supplemented by additional study at bible institutes outside Turkmenistan. According to the pastor, for official purposes the courses are not described as religious education, but rather as bible lessons, which is "a broad interpretation."

RESTRICTIONS ON CHURCH ACTIVITIES

¶3. (C) Tolmachev said importing religious literature with official permission remains a problem. Several months ago, his church ordered a shipment of 60 bibles, received in three packages. Although permission for that shipment was approved by the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), Tolmachev's further request was received negatively, being told that 60 was enough. Each time a request to import religious literature is made to the CRA, the pastor is told that a commission needs to review the material. There is no information about the composition of this commission and its members' credentials. Tolmachev suggested that, if the commission had exclusively Muslim members, "of course no Christian literature will be approved." The group receives some information via the Internet, but the system is too slow to receive large files.

¶4. (C) Since the church recently relocated its office, it will need to submit a request to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to amend its bylaws to show its new legal address. Tolmachev is concerned that the MOJ will take advantage of an amendment to the church's bylaws to make other changes that would further restrict the group's activities. When the church sends a letter seeking permission or help from the government, for example to locate new office space, conduct youth camps, import literature, it does not even receive a response. In the group's search for new office space, they sent requests to the mayor's office asking for premises. The mayor's office controls most of the available office space. They were shown four basement locations, none of which were

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fit for use, lacking water, restrooms, etc. Eventually they rented space from a private landlord.

¶5. (C) Concerning the ownership of property, the Church's bylaws allow it to own property, but in practice there is no legal basis for such ownership, no mechanism for transfer of property to a church. Tolmachev said this question has remained unresolved for several years, as does the question about the necessity to register branch churches. For example, Tolmachev said it would be better if Greater Grace's branch in Mary city had its own financial records apart from the Ashgabat church, but it cannot because it is not a legal entity. In light of all these obstacles, Tolmachev offered that registered groups "feel more pressure than those that are not registered," because registered groups carry out their activities officially and the government can block them if it thinks they are doing too much. He acknowledged, however, the unregistered groups are more at risk when they carry out their activities.

¶6. (C) Despite the obstacles, Tolmachev said the church is growing. Once or twice per week, members conduct "open evangelism" on the street, talking to people, distributing literature, and inviting them to the Sunday church service. According to Tolmachev, the church's bylaws state that they have the right to spread their faith. He said they are not aggressive with their message, but rather offer it and people can "take it or leave it." They have been conducting street evangelism since 1995 and Tolmachev said their members have never been detained by the police, although government officials know that church members carry out this activity.

#### A GROWING BRANCH IN MARY CITY

¶7. (C) Greater Grace Church opened a branch in Mary city in 2007. Its leased space is located in the same building as the Embassy-run American Corner and the Russian consulate. Local authorities told Tolmachev that, if he found premises in a privately-owned building, they would not object to the church holding meetings. Tolmachev is the pastor at both the Ashgabat and Mary churches, and travels each week to Mary to conduct a Wednesday evening worship service. About 100 people attend the services in Mary, and ninety percent of them are ethnic Turkmen. Tolmachev said representatives of

the local council for religious affairs attend every service, arriving after the service has begun, and conduct a head count. He recounted the recent experience of one ethnic Turkmen member who was stopped by a CRA official after leaving a church service. The official confiscated for review a DVD that included photos of various church activities and then brought the woman to two mosques. He told her that "a Turkmen woman should be a Muslim," and offered her an all-expense paid Hajj. He also asked her to be an informer about the activities of the church. Since that time, she only attends services in the company of others. The woman's son is an army officer, also a believer, and Tolmachev suggested that might be the reason the authorities singled her out, although he had no doubt that there are other people in the group who report about church activities to the authorities.

#### NEXT STEPS FOR IMPROVING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

18. (C) Tolmachev suggested that the government should permit a religious bookstore to open that could provide a location where all approved literature could be sold. He thought national and local CRAs should include representatives from groups besides Muslim imams and the occasional Russian Orthodox priest. The government should address the property question in order to clarify how churches can legally own property. The government should do more in the provinces to insure that religious equality is respected. Since the law allows people to share their faith, he questioned why there was a negative reaction by Muslims when Christians exercise this right. He thought a roundtable that included government

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decision makers could be useful, provided it focused on a couple issues, such as property ownership, registration, or literature, and concluded with a definite solution of the issue. Media coverage would be important to hold the government accountable and make people aware of the legitimacy of diverse religious groups. Tolmachev offered that the government prefers minority religious groups to remain underground and secret, rather than allowing them the public profile to which they are entitled by law.

19. (C) CONCLUSION: The situation of Greater Grace Church illustrates the problems facing many registered religious groups. Trying to comply with government requirements for approval gives the CRA veto power over many of the church's activities. Moreover, the outcome of religious groups' interactions with government officials is unpredictable and arbitrary. In that regard, a roundtable with the government focused on resolving discreet issues and clarifying policy would be an appropriate step forward. However, the willingness of appropriate government officials to participate and engage is far from certain and, in the view of some religious leaders, unlikely, unless approval comes from the highest levels of the government. END CONCLUSION.  
MILES